

Evan McMorris-Santoro, *Talking Points Memo*

If Democrats want to fight about NASCAR teams, it seems NASCAR teams are ready to fight back.

Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) started it when she offered up an amendment to the federal spending bill calling on the Army stop spending millions of dollars to splash its logo all over, among other things, the Sprint Cup car driven by Ryan Newman. Now Newman, and the owners of his ride, are gearing up to spin out McCollum's plan on the opening lap.

Rubbin', as they say, is racin' -- and it looks like NASCAR is ready to put the Democrats into the wall.

McCollum is taking a hard line against NASCAR, calling on the Pentagon to cease spending taxpayer funds to sponsor Newman's #39 Chevy Impala. Other branches of the military ended their sponsorship of Sprint Cup cars -- a sponsorship that comes with a hefty pricetag -- years ago. But, as the National Journal reports, the Army is still at it, dropping \$7 million in racing sponsorship money on the sport last year.

The Congresswoman's staff told the magazine they could find no benefit to the Army from the deal.

"Who is in Iraq or Afghanistan because they saw an Army car go around the track?" McCollum's chief of staff said. "We're in a fiscal crisis. There's an amendment on the floor to eliminate all funding for homeless veterans. How is it more important to fund race cars than to help the men and women who served our country?"

That may be a fair argument, but as a number of observers pointed out Wednesday, the battle between NASCAR and a left-leaning Congresswoman is about as tailor-made for Republican campaign ads as something can get.

As if on cue, Newman and his racing team have begun pitting their fans against McCollum and

her Democratic allies supporting the bill.

You can guess what that looks like.

"Tell your Congressperson you support the U.S. Army's involvement in motorsports," reads a Facebook message posted by Newman this afternoon.

"Done!" one of the nearly 200 to sign on to the petition so far wrote. "Let's see if Eric Cantor pays attention to his email."

"Everyone knows that racing & military go together," wrote another.

McCollum's chief of staff told the Virginian-Pilot NASCAR fans shouldn't get upset over the plan. The military would still be able to recruit at events -- and the amendment was not meant to say anything about their sport.

"The question is why are taxpayer dollars being used to sponsor NASCAR race cars?" he told the paper. "We've got two wars going on. Can we afford it? This is not an attack on NASCAR. There are a lot of private-sector businesses that support NASCAR. The Pentagon is in the war fighting business and not race business."

Over at Stewart-Hass racing, Newman's car owners, the homepage is filled with pro-Army messaging. To hear the team tell it, the Army's involvement in NASCAR is nothing but upside.

"Last year alone, the U.S. Army's motorsports programs generated more than 46,000 qualified [recruiting] leads," the site reads.

Stewart-Haas and NASCAR did not immediately respond to request for comment.

It should be noted that the ongoing budget fight is full of amendments from Democrats and Republicans alike, that would seek to slash tiny sums of money from the massive federal budget, but that do little to balance the nation's books.

As the National Journal's Jim O'Sullivan and Ben Terris point out, McCollum's amendment saves little money, at a potentially big political cost. They write that while progressives may cheer at the chance to stick it to both NASCAR and excessive military spending, the plan suggests Democrats are happy to cede the race stands to the GOP.

The amendment is "a clear indication that Democrats think that the NASCAR voting bloc is not voting with them now or anytime in the future," the pair write.

That might not sit well with some Democrats, like Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA) -- who rode into the Virginia governor's mansion in 2002 thanks in part to the NASCAR Craftsman Truck series Ford F-150 he sponsored at Martinsville.